

Good morning, my dear colleagues,

There are no words for what we and our worlds are experiencing. In the midst of the many ways you are affected by the pandemic, please cherish the moments in which you find beauty, in which you connect lovingly with others. Value the small and solid sensations of the present that anchor you. Please breathe and believe in the now that leads towards futures.

This morning, we are two days from an abbreviated spring recess. Classes run on a Wednesday schedule tomorrow, which further shortens the teaching week for many. In less than a month, we have been asked to move and restart our courses twice. This will be the third time. Finding and sustaining the attention of our students is likely to be challenging under these circumstances.

Let’s think about attention before we step back for the break. Are you familiar with the cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham? His research has focused on how minds learn, and I often return to his principles when designing learning activities. Willingham (2009) writes that “People are naturally curious, but we are not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive conditions are right, we will avoid thinking.”

Isn’t this fascinating when we think of our students? We are attracted to new information but not to doing anything practical with it UNLESS “the cognitive conditions are right.” For the cognitive conditions to be right, we need to believe that the problem to be solved is neither too easy nor too hard. Our work has to challenge us yet be within our current capacities to reach.

This describes the ideal learning situation, and we are in learning situations that are deeply affected by traumatic experiences. To the traumatized mind (see the table embedded here), curiosity itself is difficult to spark. To the traumatized mind, most problems may seem too hard to solve.

Minds at Work

Traumatized Mind	Working Mind	Learning Mind
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficulty filtering stimuli (distraction) inconsistent focus 	Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> actively filters stimuli actively maintains focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficulty retaining information difficulty organizing information, even with practice 	Memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> actively retains information actively organizes information with practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficulty connecting ideas and skills difficulty understanding contexts difficulty creating coherent projects for external audiences 	Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> actively connects ideas and skills actively sees contexts actively creates coherent projects for external audiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficulty identifying appropriate external audiences difficulty communicating projects appropriately or coherently to external audiences difficulty distinguishing between performance/presentation and personal life 	Performance/presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> actively identifies appropriate external audiences actively communicates projects appropriately or coherently to external audiences actively distinguishes between performance/presentation and personal life

Foster, 2019

How do we respond, then, as educators in this uncertain time? Openly acknowledging the stresses that students may be experiencing helps them release these into safe spaces such as discussion boards or wikis. Compartmentalizing assignments into short steps and labeling these may make the work seem more attainable as well as safer to overloaded minds. Providing multiple opportunities for practice can reinforce senses of competency and thus rebuild confidence and again, senses of safety.

For the week ahead, I would like to remind you that many of our students will be observing significant holy days in their religions. Please see the links to religious calendars and religious accommodation policies below.

2019-20 Multifaith Religious Calendar:

<https://chaplain.williams.edu/2019-2020-multifaith-religious-holiday-calendar/>

Also, tomorrow the TLC will be offering our weekly Open Conversation, from 3-4pm. We are taking steps to protect Zoom sessions and ask that you follow the requested steps once you click the link below.

TLC Open Conversation:

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/494316024?pwd=N0xtQzZncTFIbnByNzNGUDJIWHkvQT09>

Be safe. Be well. Enjoy the short break.

Warmly,

Gina